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Contact: Kevin Hardy

“Universal Design For Learning” Workshop Emphasizes Accessibility As Key Education Design Element

More than 115 Louisiana educators, representing public colleges and universities and elementary and secondary schools across the state, took part in a workshop entitled “An Introduction to Universal Design for Learning (UDL)” in Baton Rouge on Saturday, April 17. The all-day event, sponsored by the Louisiana Board of Regents, was designed to foster access to learning for all Louisiana students. The workshop’s focus was the importance of *building in* accessibility to *all* students when designing educational materials, facilities and electronic delivery systems.

“Universal Design for Learning is the process of building *in* - rather than adding *on* - accessibility and support for diverse learning needs,” explained Skip Stahl, one of the nationally-recognized experts in the emerging realm of UDL on hand for the workshop. Stahl is the Director of the Universal Learning Center, Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), in Boston.

“A universal design approach is simply more practical, elegant and effective, since it is always better to build in flexibility from the beginning, rather than try to add it on later,” said Stahl. “While a UDL approach often begins by addressing the needs of students ‘in the margins,’ accommodations for a subset of the population usually result in increased benefits for everyone.”

As one example of this phenomenon in day-to-day life, Stahl cited common uses of closed-captioning for the hearing impaired, including televisions in sports bars, where the sound is muted, and in bedrooms, where one partner can watch television without disturbing the sleep of the other.

“Closed-caption use for the hearing impaired is down at about eighth or ninth on the list of common uses,” said Stahl. “It’s an excellent example of how adaptive technology often enhances the lives of the general population.”

Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D., Director of the DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities,

Regents UDL Workshop

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Internetworking and Technology) Adaptive Technology Lab at the University of Washington, and Co-Director, AccessIT, the National Center for Adaptive Technology in Education, who also spoke at the workshop, emphasized using and adapting *technology* to accommodate learners.

“A universally-designed video/multimedia presentation, for example, is videotaped with captions in mind,” Burgstahler said. “It features large, clear captions, and it is designed so that key content is spoken as well as demonstrated visually.” Burgstahler also discussed UDL design considerations for such content delivery technology as web sites, as well as UDL issues in the design of physical facilities.

The workshop featured plenary sessions in the morning, with afternoon breakout sessions tailored to specific accommodation issues facing the Louisiana educators in attendance.

Responses from attendees after the workshop indicated that most found their experience valuable and readily applicable to their specific situations:

“Universal Design for Learning is the cutting edge of education today, “ said workshop attendee Sharon Eaton of Southeastern Louisiana University. “Hearing two nationally-renowned speakers on this topic was wonderful. I think the Board of Regents is working very hard to help ensure electronic access to Louisiana students. This is an endeavor that needs to be supported at all levels and can only increase the quality of education we provide here in Louisiana.”

Desiree Devereaux, e-Learning Coordinator at SOWELA Technical and Community College in Lake Charles, was equally impressed:

“The UDL workshop was an extremely valuable experience to me, both as the e-Learning Coordinator for my institution and as someone who will be working with the administration to plan a future on-site computer lab and help center for our students and faculty,” said Devereaux. “One of the most useful things I learned from the UDL workshop was the importance of incorporating plans, from the very beginning, to meet the needs of our special populations. I look forward to attending more workshops to expand my knowledge and awareness in this area.”

“[The presenters] offered many strategies to use technology to make instructional content ‘reachable’ for individuals with disabilities. Strategies for reaching individuals with vision, hearing, and/or cognitive impairments were offered and were appropriate for individuals in K-16 settings,” said Dr. Christine D. Templet, educational consultant with the Jefferson Parish School System.

